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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 002136

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [EPET](#) [NA](#) [NL](#) [VZ](#)

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/VENEZUELA/ANTILLES: DUTCH WORRIED
ABOUT CHAVEZ; DETERMINED TO ENGAGE

REF: A. A) THE HAGUE 2127

[1](#)B. B) THE HAGUE 2044 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR CLIFFORD SOBEL FOR REASONS 1.4(B) AND (D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: According to Prime Minister Balkenende's chief foreign policy advisor, concerns about Venezuelan interference in the Dutch Antilles and Aruba have recently risen to the top of the Dutch list of foreign policy priorities. A Chavez visit to the Netherlands is not currently under consideration, but Balkenende may try to deliver a firm message to Chavez on the margins of the upcoming UNGA. Foreign Minister Bot and Justice Minister Donner both plan to visit Caracas in the next few months, and Balkenende is also considering a possible visit in November. During a recent briefing by a visiting USG Venezuela expert, working level MFA contacts admit that the Dutch feel torn between their desire to support an EU consensus on Venezuela and protecting Dutch national interests in the Caribbean. The Dutch have compiled a list of grievances ranging from flyovers by military aircraft to public statements by Venezuelan officials recalling Venezuelan territorial claims to the islands. Further U.S.-Dutch consultations in this area would be beneficial to both parties. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) Rob Swartbol, Prime Minister Balkenende's senior foreign policy advisor, told Ambassador Sobel on August 1 that the Dutch government is increasingly concerned about Venezuelan President Chavez' efforts to broaden his influence in the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba. Swartbol acknowledged that for years the Dutch did not take Venezuelan maneuvering seriously, but stressed that now it is at top of our agenda. Prime Minister Balkenende has taken a personal interest in the issue, he added, and has asked for a paper in the next two to three weeks to help clarify Dutch options. Swartbol confirmed that, contrary to earlier indications, the Dutch do not plan to invite Chavez to visit The Netherlands in the near future. If Chavez does come to The Netherlands as part of a broader European tour, however, the Prime Minister would expect to meet with him, he added.

[1](#)3. (C) Ambassador Sobel stressed that the U.S. shared Dutch concerns about destabilizing Venezuelan moves in the region. The Dutch, he added, could play a role in encouraging the EU to stand firm against Chavez' destabilization efforts. The EU, he added, needs to be very careful in engaging Chavez, who is a proven master at manipulating engagement efforts to his own advantage. EU members considering selling weapons to Venezuela for ostensibly legitimate purposes, in particular, need to understand the broader impacts of such sales. Swartbol agreed that the EU should have a coordinated approach on arms sales and other issues that took such concerns into account. Although the Dutch do not want to give Chavez a day in the sun, he added, they also see no realistic alternative to engagement at this point.

[1](#)4. (C) According to Swartbol, Prime Minister Balkenende may propose meeting Chavez on the margins of the UNGA in September to send a strong signal that Venezuelan infiltration efforts in the islands are unacceptable. Swartbol suggested, however, that a final decision on whether Balkenende would engage Chavez in New York would depend in part on FM Bot's plans, as the Prime Minister would not want to engage Chavez before Bot has had an opportunity to meet with him. (Note: The MFA told us on July 29 that Bot currently plans to visit Venezuela in the October 17-24 timeframe.) If a meeting in New York does not take place, the next logical time for a Balkenende-Chavez meeting could be in November, when the Prime Minister is scheduled to travel to Suriname.

[1](#)5. (C) PM Balkenende confirmed to Ambassador Sobel during a private meeting on July 29 that he hopes to engage Chavez directly about Dutch concerns over the Antilles, but left open the issue of timing and venue. In addition to the Bot and/or Balkenende meetings with Chavez, Dutch Minister of Justice told the Ambassador on July 30 that he also plans to travel to Venezuela, Colombia, Suriname, and Curacao beginning August 27. Although Donner's trip will focus primarily on improving counter-narcotics cooperation in the region (especially with Colombia), Donner also expressed serious concerns about political developments in Venezuela and Chavez' intentions toward the Netherlands Antilles and Aruba, which he described as our Malvinas.

16. (C) Separately, during a briefing on Venezuela by a visiting USG expert on July 28, Dutch working-level representatives from the MFA's Western Hemisphere Department expressed deep concern over the increasing frequency and growing seriousness of Venezuelan attempts to influence and intimidate the Dutch Antilles' government. Dutch interlocutors provided a four page list of incidents (reported in other channels) to illustrate their concerns. These ranged from an unauthorized 2002 flyover of Curacao by Venezuelan military aircraft, to Venezuelan accusations (around the time of the USS Saipan visit) that the Antilles supported U.S. aggression against Venezuela, to recent public statements (including by the Venezuelan Consul General in Curacao and the Governor of Falcon) calling for a restoration of the historic relationship between Venezuela and the islands. Most disturbing to the Dutch were the many instances of Chavez apparently offering assistance to political figures (including former minister Cova) to encourage them to challenge Prime Minister Ys' government as well as existing ties between The Netherlands and the islands. The Dutch representatives noted that Chavez had a wide range of tools for exerting influence on the islands, including the flow of oil, pro-Venezuelan politicians (such as Cova), and even criminal groups (such as that gathered around former strongman Godett); used together, these elements could have a powerful destabilizing effect on the islands and create serious problems for the Dutch government.

17. (C) The Dutch diplomats noted that they found it difficult to reconcile their national interests regarding the Antilles with their general desire to support and implement EU consensus positions. For example, the Dutch found it unlikely that the EU could find consensus on taking a strong public position on Venezuelan Human Rights abuses, although they argued that EU representatives could and would deliver tough messages in private. The Dutch diplomats noted that Chavez had successfully maneuvered to avoid having an EU team observe elections in the past and predicted he would do so again, but doubted that this would lead to a public confrontation between the EU and Caracas. At the same time, the recent Dutch deployment of F-16s to Aruba -- a move unrelated to any tensions with Venezuela, but one they hoped Caracas noticed -- demonstrated that the Dutch remain capable of defending their national interests in the region if necessary. In recent meetings with the Ambassador and DAO, CHOD Berlijn said that the Dutch are exploring options for boosting the military presence around the islands (potentially including submarines and naval forces from other EU members), primarily for counter-narcotics purposes. As noted ref a, the CEO of Royal Dutch Shell has recently expressed concerns regarding Chavez' illogical approach to foreign investors and the potential impact of his policies in the region.

18. (C) COMMENT: As an EU state with Caribbean interests, the Dutch have good justifications for assuming a leading role within the EU in developing a strategy toward Venezuela. Such a role does not come naturally to the Dutch, however, and they will be reluctant to challenge traditional Spanish leadership on Latin American issues without serious cause and/or encouragement. A policy of confronting Chavez would also be risky domestically given the Dutch public's ambivalent attitude toward the Antilles and Aruba and the Dutch colonial legacy in general. That said, senior Dutch officials, including Balkenende, clearly understand that Chavez' machinations threaten Dutch interests directly -- in addition to destabilizing the region more broadly -- but believe that their options for dealing with this threat are currently limited. We should continue to seek every opportunity to engage the Dutch on this issue to help develop regional options for countering Chavez' destabilizing policies, and to encourage the Dutch to work within European circles to help stiffen the spine of the EU. END COMMENT.

SOBEL